

SVERRE LYNGSTAD:
Knut Hamsun, Novelist

Peter Lang: New York, 2005. Pp. 394. ISBN 0820474339.

Sverre Lyngstad's *Knut Hamsun, Novelist* is his third monograph and is the only full-length comprehensive study of Hamsun's twenty-one novels in English since Harald Næss published *Knut Hamsun* in 1984. While other studies such as Humpal's *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* (1999) focus on Hamsun's works of the 1890s, this edition aims to "focus on the themes, structure, and to a lesser extent, style of each novel, and each cluster of novels, while attempting to demonstrate the links between one work and another, and between one cluster of works and another where such links are apparent" (p.xiii). In seeking to analyze Hamsun's achievement as a writer of fiction, Lyngstad dispenses with the excessive biographical detail and ideological speculation that plagues so much scholarship on the writer in the United States. Instead, in eleven easily readable chapters and a conclusion, Lyngstad evaluates Hamsun's novels chronologically detailing the plot, the characters, and key motifs. In clustering the novels together, Lyngstad includes novels that are sometimes overlooked by other scholars, carefully pointing out the inconsistent quality in some of these lesser-known works, in particular with regard to stylistic elements. Additionally Lyngstad offers a brief sample of the critical reception of the novels and includes detailed endnotes and references to secondary literature from both Europe and the United States.

Written in an engaging style, the book offers a cornucopia of information on Hamsun in an entertaining format. Of particular interest are the cultural contexts given for Hamsun's work and the relationship between Hamsun and his European counterparts. The analysis in the book is subjective; a fact readily acknowledged by Lyngstad who maintains that this very subjectivity permits a fuller evaluation of Hamsun's uneven corpus. While all literary analysis is to a certain extent subjective, that subjectivity may be tempered by a fuller engagement with other current Hamsun scholarship. Unfortunately Lyngstad relegates references to other scholars to endnotes, probably in favor of maintaining his engaging narrative style, one that straddles literary review and analysis. This choice on the part of Lyngstad makes the book highly recommendable to students beginning their study of Hamsun, but can leave seasoned Hamsun enthusiasts desiring a fresher, more in-depth analysis. Exemplary of this trait is Lyngstad's discussion of *Mysterier*. After pointing out notable comparisons between Hamsun's novel and the work of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, Lyngstad discusses the love plot, the relationship between Nagel and Miniman, and the portrayal of Nagel as an individual who lacks a stable identity. Lyngstad also claims that the

narrative technique in *Mysteries* is looser than that in *Pan* or *Hunger*, and adds that despite Hamsun's disregard for narrative traditions such as coherent plot, consistency of characterization, and causality, the novel cannot be classified as entirely modernist due to its pattern of repetition. Moreover Lyngstad suggests a relationship between the novel and absurdism. After such tantalizing interpretative suggestions, a Hamsun scholar becomes somewhat surprised then at Lyngstad's cursory conclusion to the *Mysteries* analysis; – that “*Mysteries* is a very rich novel, and a brief discussion cannot do full justice to it. In any case, the reader will want to work out his or her own interpretation of the book, which, despite its occasional quirks and perversities, presents a bracing challenge to one's critical imagination” (p.35). Similarly Lyngstad's overall conclusion that the Hamsun corpus does not constitute an organically developed unity, and that Hamsun will remain most remembered outside Norway for his artistic achievement in the novels *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, *Pan*, and *Victoria*, his other works being regarded as too exotic, offers no surprise for scholars of Hamsun.

Lyngstad is currently the most important English translator of Hamsun, and has to date completed nine translations, all of which are excellent and have opened up Hamsun to the English reader like never before. In the United States, where only one Hamsun novel, *Ny Jord*, was available prior to Hamsun's receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1920, the Norwegian writer remains relatively unknown outside Scandinavian Studies circles. Thus Lyngstad's contribution and attempt to create a literary space for the Norwegian Nobel laureate is a most valuable resource for American enthusiasts of world literature. With this book Sverre Lyngstad has again shown his encyclopedic knowledge of Hamsun and has added much to his legacy as an astute scholar of Scandinavian Studies. One hopes it will fuel further interest in the Norwegian writer in this the Hamsun Year.